Strengthening the Foundations: Mutuality and the Performing Arts

Working Paper No. PONC105

Dr Race Mathews

Speech given on 6 September 2001 at QUT.

Program on Nonprofit Corporations
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia

September 2001

The Program on Nonprofit Corporations is a research unit at the Queensland University of Technology. It seeks to promote research from many disciplines into the nonprofit sector.

The Program on Nonprofit Corporations reproduces and distributes these working papers from authors who are affiliated with the Program or who present papers at Program seminars. They are not edited or reviewed, and the views in them are those of their authors.

A list of all the Program's publications and working papers are available from the address below:

Published by the Program on Nonprofit Corporations
The Queensland University of Technology
GPO Box 2434
BRISBANE QLD 4001
Phone: 07 3864 1020
Fax: 07 3864 1812
Email: ponc@qut.edu.au
http://www.qut.edu.au/bus/ponc

ISBN 1 86435 538 7
ISSN 107-1516

Abstract

Following the positive response by governments to the report of Helen Nugent's major performing arts inquiry, urgent attention needs to be given to the seedbed companies where so often audiences are introduced to the performing arts and practitioners are launched on their professional careers. Doing so calls for lateral thinking such as will enable the widest possible range of stakeholders to become involved. One solution may be to develop multi-stakeholder arts mutuals from the simpler arts mutuals such as co-operatives which are already widespread in many spheres of arts activity. Relevant models include the multi-stakeholder mutuals of the Mondragon Co-operative Corporation and the employee mutuals which are being trialled currently in Britain. Possible stakeholders in an arts mutual could include employed, unemployed and trainee practitioners, professional, quasi-professional and amateur theatre bodies, community groups, municipal councils and statutory bodies such as the ABC. Mutualist models may also be helpful to major performing arts companies facing erosion of their subscription incomes or incurring higher support services costs.

Makers of a Revolution

The lecture I have been asked to repeat today was delivered earlier this year at Deakin University, as the annual George Fairfax Fellow's Kenneth Myer Lecture in Arts and Entertainment Management. George Fairfax was until his untimely death a towering polymath of the Australian stage, as an outstanding actor, director and theatre manager and an outspoken friend and advocate of the performing arts. His close friend, the late Ken Myer, was a prominent member of a Melbourne family noted for its philanthropic support for the arts, and the founding Chairman of the Victorian Arts Centre Trust which George Fairfax served as founding General Manager.

In honouring the memory of George Fairfax through the fellowship which bears his name and this Ken Myer Lecture, we honour also the memories of others like him - giants of the performing arts in their day, and makers of the post-war revolution which gave Victoria and Melbourne theatre as we now know it. Standing, as most of us from time to time do, in the foyer of the Victorian Arts Centre to whose shaping both George Fairfax and Ken Myer were key contributors, we are reminded also of others those us whose efforts so largely shaped the climate of opinion - the valuing of the performing arts in all their forms - which made the construction of the Centre possible.

We are reminded of those who broke the long drought of vibrant, creative, innovative, readily accessible and socially inclusive theatre - the drought which so deeply saddened and frustrated writers in the early years of the twentieth century such as Louis Esson and Vance and Nettie Palmer. Faces and names which are the stuff of Melbourne's theatre history - Frank Thring, Brett Randall and Irene Mitchell, Peter O'Shaugnessy, John Alden, John Sumner and Wal Cherry - immediately spring to mind.

Needless to say, any list necessarily is less exhaustive than subjective and idiosyncratic. Mine reflects in part my intense personal gratitude for the sense of wonder and revelation to which theatre introduced me and many tens of thousands of Australians - young and old - in the early 1950s.

Who having seen Frank Thring, at his tiny 200-seat Arrow Theatre in Middle Park - Melbourne's cutting-edge theatre of the day - play Othello to Zoe Caldwell's Desdemona and Alex Scott's Iago, or Oedipus to Zoe Caldwell's Jocasta, could ever forget the experience? Who could not have been entranced by the beauty of Robin Lovejoy's sets for the Arrow's productions? Who having seen the young Helmut Newton's magnificent photographic record of notable past performances in the foyer at the Arrow could have failed to draw enduring inspiration from them? Approaching half a century later, my memory of Newton's photographs at the Arrow remains as vivid as experiencing them for the first time.

The list likewise reflects my introduction to Shakespeare by the John Alden company; of the excitement of attending most of the productions in the first season of John Sumner's Union Theatre Repertory Company (UTRC) where the young George Fairfax made his professional debut; of being enthralled by performances at Peter O'Shaugnessy's theatre in the St Peter's Church complex at Eastern Hill and Irene Mitchell and Brett Randall's Little Theatre in St Martins Lane in South Yarra, where later I again saw George Fairfax at work; of marvelling at the inventiveness of Edouard and Zenia Borovansky of the Borovansky Ballet and of Wal Cherry's productions both for the UTRC and later at Emerald Hill; and of seeing the young Barry Humphries play in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" for a touring UTRC company in the Latrobe Valley.

What was notable about all these practitioners of the performing arts was their commitment to theatre-making as a vocation. As the then Director of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, Hugh Hunt, pointed out in his notable Kathleen Robinson Lectures on Drama and Theatre at Sydney University in 1958 "Without the integrity of the artist who seeks to make theatre in a way that he believes to be right, there can be no art in the theatre, merely a product known as 'show business'".[1] In passing: how much longer must Australians wait for a truly comprehensive and critical history of Australian theatre - a definitive account of who brought us where we are today, how it was done and what are the implications for future public policy?

The wider benefits for Victoria and Australia were considerable, both economically and culturally. What was also occurring - albeit less obviously - was the laying of the foundations for the rebirth of an Australian film industry in the late 1960's and 1970s. Many of the young Australians who have gone on to make notable reputations for themselves in cinema both nationally and internationally drew their inspiration or had their starts in the theatres whose birth George Fairfax facilitated. Would there have a renaissance of the Australian film industry if there had not first been a new flowering of Australian theatre? And how much in turn was not theatre also the incubator for Australian content in television?

George Fairfax

Younger as George Fairfax was than some of those I have named, he was very much of their mind, values, principles and aspirations. Like that great American Martin Luther King Jnr., he had a dream - a dream of the arts as a means of social, cultural and economic inclusion. His guiding maxim for both the Arts Centre and for theatre more generally were that they must be "for all the people".[2] The objectives for the Arts Centre which he drafted as its CEO in 1971 included that the building should "encourage people to come in and sample what is inside".[3]

"I personally feel", he wrote, "that the Arts Centre has an added role today in a world where the idea of a liberal education is waning. Centres such as this have a responsibility to ensure that people have the chance to learn, know, enjoy and exchange ideas about the arts".[4] "The arts", he believed, "must lead, they must see things happening in our society before other people do and be ready to move".[5]

That many in the community might be missing out on what the Arts Centre had to offer deeply troubled and challenged him. A 1989 report quotes him as regretting that:

> There are people out in the community who still regard the Arts Centre as something a little foreign in their lives, they see it either as too establishment or too remote. ... I sometimes drive through suburban Melbourne and look at row upon row of houses and wonder if many

[1] Hunt H. 1960, *The Making of Australian Theatre*, Melbourne, F.W. Cheshire, p. 6.

[2] *Australian National Theatre (ANT)News*, April-June, 1984.

[3] Van Stael C. 1995, *George Fairfax: His Influence on Theatre with Emphasis on the Victorian Arts Centre*. Typescript held by the Victorian Arts Centre Performing Arts Museum.

[4] *Victorian Arts Centre News*, May-June, 1989.

[5] Age, 29 August, 1989.

> of a particular street have ever come into the Arts Centre. I wonder if there's a street where perhaps nobody has. And, if that's the case. how do we get them to come in?[6]

He was accordingly the less patient with critics who argued that the atmosphere of the Centre should be more formal: "I can understand people saying "I've come to the opening night of the opera and got dressed up in my gown and tiara", or whatever ... but I just think that they are going to have to wear it, because the popularity feel and the buzz factor is so strong that we must, maybe regrettably in a sense, just put to one side the other (gown and tiara) factor".[7]

Nor was his approach inclusive of audiences alone. While he wanted the Arts Centre to welcome innovative productions, he was adamant that it should not be at the expense of other venues. He was wary of a situation where the Centre might be seen to be "sucking up everything around".[8] He wanted partnerships between the Centre and commercial theatre bodies in order to explore options which otherwise might have been beyond the Centre's means. He sought synergies in every quarter from which the arts might benefit and through which they could be brought closer to the people.

Not least, he never forgot his origins as a performing arts practitioner among other practitioners - a worker among other workers. He was tireless in seeking to bring about better working conditions and professional development for his fellow practitioners, not at the Arts Centre alone, but, through it, for the industry as a whole.

What he recalled as the greatest moment of all in his involvement with the Arts Centre was the day the building workers brought their families into the concert hall for the first time:

> I can't remember the concert as much as I can what happened before hand. Some of the workers brought their families in. You'd see people go in and a guy would say to his wife and kids "See that bit of strip there? I did that, I put that on" And I was moved by that. ... The memory stays with me, because what it means is that we all have a role in something as big as that. ... You just translate that into society and it means we all have a role in society that is equally important as one another. Yes, I had tears behind my eyes that day.[9]

Asked when retiring to name the one thing for which he would most like to be remembered, he answered simply:

> That we applied our best efforts into having to build those things that would work for the public (and) that would work for the people who perform ... I'd like to be remembered as someone who was part of getting all that going.[10]

Looking ahead, he saw a new role for himself:

> The thing I hope to be able to do is become some sort of advocate for the arts. I feel very strongly that we need to present the case for the arts much more aggressively and bravely than we have in the past. ... I believe politicians can be convinced by arguments well researched, planned and expressed.[11]

A Speculation

What then, but for his tragically untimely death, might George Fairfax have seen as the pressing priority for theatre in the new and troubling times in which his city and his state now find themselves? What would have been his reaction to a situation where attendances at theatres is either static or falling - where the audience in some instances is literally aging before our eyes?

---

6 *Victorian Arts Centre News*, May-June, 1989.

7 Ibid

8 *ANT News*, April-June, 1984.

9 Van Stael, 1995.

10 *Victorian Arts Centre News*, May-June, 1989.

11 *Age*, 29 August, 1989.

According to the recent final report of Helen Nugent's Major Performing Arts Inquiry, *Securing the Future*, the proportion of theatre attendees over the age of 45 increased between 1991 and 1995 from 33.8 per cent to 37.7 per cent.[12] Less than 20 percent of the audience for the performing arts is under twenty years of age, as compared with 38 per cent of the population.[13] Far from overall theatre attendances increasing as might have been hoped, they declined between 1992 and 1997 at an average annual rate of 0.8 per cent.[14]

The decline on the other side of the footlights has been even more precipitous. Between 1992 and 1998, the average number of actors per production in the state theatre companies fell by 30 per cent.[15] The number of plays in each season has been reduced by the Melbourne Theatre Company from thirteen to eleven, by the Sydney Theatre Company from twelve to eleven and by the Queensland Theatre Company from eight to seven.[16]

The Nugent report concluded that "Companies experiencing difficulties are programming more popular, less risky repertoire, and theatre and dance companies are producing less work by new playwrights or choreographers".[17] As Hugh Hunt observed forcibly in his Kathleen Robinson Lecture "Only four characters and one set may be an economic advantage, so why not no characters and no set? Then you need no audience".[18] The downside to Hunt's humour today is that the economic rationalists among us may take it literally.

My speculation tonight is that what George Fairfax would have wanted in the first instance would have been a regeneration of the seedbed companies which the Arrow Theatre and The Little Theatre of his early manhood - and more recently the Pram Factory, The Church, Theatreworks and Anthill - so triumphantly exemplified. He would have wanted to see more companies and venues where audiences could have an affordable introduction to theatre - where performers could get started on what for some would become professional careers. He would have wanted theatre to become much more an activity which people as much practice and attend locally within their own communities, as well as look for externally in venues such as the Arts Centre.

Entering as some believe us to be on the "twenty-eighty" economy - the economy where all the work needing to be done requires no more than 20 per cent of the available workforce, and the other 80 per cent of us are economically redundant - the need for means whereby people may re-discover an active engagement in the arts has never been more urgent.[19] Re-engaging with the arts on as widespread a basis as possible holds out the best hope of a remedy for the dumbing down of society - the waning of the idea of a liberal education and the rise of modern counterparts of the Roman "bread and circuses" - which so ominously threatens to overtake us.

Now that decisions arising from the Nugent recommendations have gone some way to remedying the parlous financial situation of flagship entities such as the Melbourne Theatre Company and the Playbox Theatre, George Fairfax would have wanted attention to be given to those less well-known venues and companies - the incubators of theatrical excellence - which have so long and tragically been denied their due. He would have wanted ways to avert losses to his city and state

---

12 Nugent H. et al 1999, *Securing the Future: Major Performing Arts Inquiry Final Report*, Canberra, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts.p.144

13 Ibid, p. 13.

14 Ibid, p. 176

15 Ibid, p. 12.

16 Ibid, p. 180.

17 Ibid, p. 12.

18 Hunt 1960, p. 47.

19 See, for example, Martin H and Schumann H. 1997 *The Global Trap: The Assault on Prosperity and Democracy,* Pluto Press (Australia), Sydney.

as needless and heart-breaking as that, for example, of The Church or Anthill and its outstanding director, Jean-Pierre Mignon.

Mutualism

However, for all that George Fairfax believed politicians can be persuaded rationally to provide more generous funding for the arts, he would have been aware, as a realist, that their resources for doing so are finite. Accordingly, he would have wanted structures which encourage other stakeholders in the arts to fully pull their weight. My speculation is that one of several part-solutions to which he would have been attracted would have been along mutualist lines - that he would have embraced mutualism as a means of furthering the arts.

Mutualism is about self-help - about people helping themselves by helping one another. What mutualist bodies - bodies such as mutual life assurance societies, permanent building societies, friendly societies, credit unions and co-operatives - also have in common with one another is that they are almost always a response to urgent community needs. For example, the Rochdale Pioneers - the twenty-eight poor cotton weavers who established their retail co-operative in Toad Lane in Manchester in 1844 - were responding to an urgent community need for affordable household requisites such as food and fuel.

Credit co-operatives - otherwise known as credit unions - were a response to the need for affordable carry-on loans for smallholder farmers and later for affordable consumer finance. Friendly societies were initially a response to the need for funeral benefits, and, later, for unemployment benefits, sickness benefits and medical and hospital care. Access to affordable life assurance was offered by mutual life assurance societies, as was access to affordable home loans by building societies.

Agricultural processing and marketing co-operatives met a pressing need on the part of farmers to capture value added to their produce beyond the farm gate. Worker co-operatives responded to the need on the part of workers for secure employment by enabling them to own their workplaces and jobs. Trade unions were originally mutualist bodies or co-operatives formed by employees in response to a pressing need to obtain a better working conditions and a just price for their labour. Examples of outstandingly successful mutuals include Canada's Desjardins credit unions and the great complex of manufacturing, retail, financial, service and support co-operatives - now the Mondragon Co-operative Corporation - at Mondragon in the Basque region of Spain.

Arts Co-operatives

Arts co-operatives are in no sense new or unfamiliar. For example, visual artists and craftspeople have made widespread use of co-operatives to market their work and access affordable materials and studio accommodation. The Victorian Print Workshop is registered as a co-operative. Melbourne has had co-operative design studios and co-operative presses. Co-operative bodies which have received grants from the Victorian Ministry for the Arts - now Arts Victoria - in recent years include, to name only a few, the Melbourne Jazz Festival Co-operative, the Ballarat Public Radio Co-operative, the Brunswick Performing Arts Co-operative, the Sandybeach Community Arts Centre Co-operative, the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative, the Swan Hill Theatre Co-operative and the Photographers Co-operative.

Arts co-operatives were the subject of a major report -*Arts Co-operatives: A Guide for Artists* - for the Victorian ministry in the 1980s. More recently the Australia Council has commissioned a report on arts consortiums - co-operative or collaborative arts marketing bodies - from the Queensland consultancy firm Positive Solutions. The Positive Solutions report identified over 400 instances of co-operative arts marketing activity. They included - to list only a few - joint staffing as between the Terrapin Puppet Theatre and Salamanca Theatre; joint database as between arts organisations in Townsville; cross-promotion as between Astra, Handspan, Chamber Made Opera and Danceworks; and co-productions as between Kooemba Jdarra and La Boite Theatre.

Nor are overseas instances of mutualist marketing measures between arts bodies lacking. As the Positive Solutions report documents, the League of Chicago Theatres - a mutual made up of some 135 member theatres in the Chicago area - bulk buys advertising space on behalf of its members, publishes theatre guides and directories and organises group promotions for its members in association with tourist and municipal bodies. The Toronto Theatre Alliance offers - among other things - a half-priced ticket store, discounted access for members to media and marketing lists, a web site, a library and forums, workshops and seminars. In the UK, similar portfolios of marketing services are provided by bodies such as Arts About Manchester - a co-operative with 45 member theatres - and Marketing the Arts in Oxford.[20]

The Arts Mutual

Even so, George Fairfax might well have come to conclude that the potential of the mutualist model for furthering the arts has yet to be fully appreciated or used to the best possible effect. What might well have come to engage his attention as well is the innovative multi-stakeholder mutuals - new and radical mutualist models for combating unemployment and improving the quality of working life - which are currently being explored in Britain. What has been proposed in Britain as the employee mutual lends itself readily to re-invention as the arts mutual.[21]

Arts mutuals would bring together key stakeholders in the performing arts in a dynamic partnership for audience growth and enhanced employment and professional development opportunities for performing arts practitioners. Members of arts mutuals could include employed, unemployed and trainee performing arts practitioners, together with professional, quasi-professional and amateur theatre companies, community groups, schools, municipal councils and - should it survive the threat which so scandalously hangs over its integrity and even its existence - the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC).

Their aim would be to enrich and up-grade the work of companies in the intermediate zone between fully professional and fully amateur theatre by enabling them to access professional performers, directors, writers and back-stage staff on an "as required" basis. It would be to enable practitioners of all kinds in the performing arts to have better job prospects in their respective callings, improve their skills and manage their working lives.

Arts mutuals would be member-owned bodies, operating on a co-operative basis, although not necessarily registered as co-operatives. There would be a small administrative staff, but the balance would be heavily towards voluntarism and contributions in kind. Close links would be maintained between arts mutuals and both the companies and the communities they serve, and they would seek to be closely attuned and responsive to company and community needs.

The benefits for practitioner members would include such core services as job search and placement, training, mentoring and career counselling. Performing arts bodies which joined arts mutuals would benefit from the role of the mutuals as job brokers, supplying permanent or temporary staff, on either a full-time or a part-time basis. An additional benefit for affiliated bodies would be that the mutual could accredit the practitioners it provided, and guarantee to replace them if they turned out to be unsuitable. Affiliated bodies would pay lower fees than non-affiliates for the mutual's services.

Members who have jobs would pay a modest weekly contribution to the mutual. Contributions from those waiting for work would be mostly in kind. A member who was not in a paid job might enter into a contract to provide an agreed number of hours of voluntary work in return for services

[20] Positive Solutions 1999, *Review of Co-operative Arts Marketing*, Sydney, The Australia Council.

[21] For an extended discussion of the employee mutual, see Leadbeater C. and Martin S. 1998, *The Employee Mutual: Combining Flexibility with Security in the New World of Work*, Demos, London.

such as job search and support or training. The voluntary work might take the form of helping out in companies which specialise in philanthropic performances such as for older people or those with disabilities.

Arts mutuals might develop in-house businesses or subsidiaries, such as wardrobe services, set-building or accounting services. They might joint venture with their affiliated arts bodies services such as catering or child care. They could accept government contracts for the delivery of employment and training programs.

Ideally, membership of an arts mutual would be acceptable to government agencies as proof of being in search of work when establishing eligibility for benefit payments, or of compliance with mutual obligation requirements. Governments could also introduce modified benefit rules for members of arts mutuals, in recognition of the frequency with which they may have to change jobs.

Not least, arts mutuals could deliver artists-in-residence programs for governments. Artists-in-residence programs have been shown to give outstanding value for the arts dollar. For example, a few weeks ago I visited the country community of Dean's Marsh for the unveiling of a new appliqué curtain for the stage in the local community centre. The skill, imagination and hard work which had gone into the curtain was remarkable.

However, due as was the success of the project to the efforts of innumerable community members, it is also unlikely to have happened without the dedication and professional skills of its artist-in-residence. Assigning key performers and other performing arts practitioners to amateur and seedbed companies through artists-in-residence programs is an excellent way of enabling them to lift the quality of their product and thereby build their attendances.

Schools

I speculate that George Fairfax's always-considerable interest in schools and the performing arts would also have caused him to be the more interested in the possible uses of arts mutuals in education. A 1995 interview quotes him as commenting in regard to school buses parked outside the Arts Centre:

> Some people would say "Oh look at all those buses outside: they're blocking up the traffic". I'd say "Oh, that's terrible: I hate seeing all those buses". Behind my hand, I'd say "I don't mind seeing them right down to St Kilda Junction.[22]

Be all that as it may, conditions in our school in much of the 1980s and 1990s have not been auspicious for the performing arts. What was rightly an increasing focus at first on getting down class sizes, and later on improving literacy and numeracy, has too often been at the expense of Victoria's children missing out on a timely introduction to the arts. The ruthless shedding of specialist staffs such as in arts and music, and the gutting of so many once thriving subject associations, has been a tragedy from which our schools are only now slowly beginning to recover.

In all too many cases, by the time a child is properly introduced to the arts, a preference for other forms of entertainment is already entrenched. Why should anybody be surprised if young people who have never had an adequate exposure to theatre become wedded instead to the keyboards of their computers? Why should young people who have never experienced the satisfactions of being a performer prefer them to those of - say - creating an original DVD movie on an Apple Imac?

While a timely involvement in the arts may expand to encompass an interest in expressing them electronically, no such happy outcome will necessarily follow if the order of introduction is

[22] Van Stael, 1995.

reversed. It has become as true again today as when Hugh Hunt put the matter in a nutshell forty years ago, that "The lost audience for plays is the young audience, the audience of tomorrow".[23]

Arts mutuals would be an effective means of bringing the arts into schools, and at the same time taking out students on a much more meaningful basis to performing venues such not only as the Arts Centre but their local companies - of fostering the performing arts where they are actually practiced rather than, as at present, largely on school premises

Work experience and vocational mentoring are now widely accepted features of the school curriculum. Arts mutuals would enable them to be offered much more widely to young people who are interested in the arts either as a career, or simply for the delight of participating in them.

Local Government

I speculate that George Fairfax might also have come to favour arts mutuals as a means of achieving a more effective involvement of local government in the performing arts. Local councils are in aggregate the largest single provider of venues for the performing arts. They are also the level of government best placed to foster development in the sphere between wholly amateur and wholly professional arts companies.

In some instances - albeit by no means in all - local councils are taking a leadership role in promoting participation in the performing arts either as practitioners or attendees. There has been strong support by local government for regional performing arts centres and the appointment of municipal arts officers.

For all this welcome evidence of municipal commitment to the performing arts, few would suppose that the resources so far made available are necessarily being used to the best possible effect. Arts mutuals could provide an important inter-face between local government and other stakeholders in the performing arts. They could play a valuable role in brokering the mentoring relationship between the major performing arts companies and regional and rural companies which the Nugent report has recommended.[24]

The ABC

I speculate that George Fairfax would have looked for support for arts mutuals not least from the ABC. It should go without saying - but in these troubled and troubling times can never be said too often - that public awareness of the arts in Australia has been due more to the ABC than any other factor or agency. Public broadcasting has been incomparably the most important single contributor - the major driving force - in introducing Australians to the arts and promoting active involvement in the arts that our country has witnessed.

For example, instrumental as was John Sumner's production of Christopher Fry's "The Lady's Not for Burning" for the inaugural 1953-54 UTRC season in confirming me in a lifelong love of the theatre, I and many others were already the more open to the play from hearing John Gielgud and Pamela Brown in Gielgud's production - like so many other good things, brought into our homes, how else but by the ABC?

Sumner has recalled Fry's piece as "a beautiful word game", where - stunning performances from Zoe Caldwell and Alex Scott apart - "George Fairfax did an amusing double, and at the end of a long dress rehearsal had me in helpless laughter at his drunk in a wheelbarrow; this contrasting with an earlier very flustered, nose-blowing mayor". At the end of a season extended from the usual two weeks to three, 7929 of the possible 8964 seats had been sold.[25] The long-serving

[23] Hunt 1960, p. 45.

[24] Nugent 1999, p. 55.

[25] Sumner J. 1993, *Recollections at Play: A Life in the Australian Theatre*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press. p. 37

theatre critic of the Melbourne *Age*, Geoffrey Hutton, credits the company's production of "The Lady's Not For Burning" with having "finally pulled its accounts out of the red".[26]

The indebtedness of the arts in all their forms to the ABC is immense. If there was one cause more than any other for which George Fairfax would have wanted to take a stand - for which literally he would have manned the barricades - it would have been the defence of the integrity, independence and proper resourcing of the ABC. Let none of us who survive him be less ready to defend the national broadcaster against attempts either from without or within to debauch or destroy it.

Mutuality within Major Arts Bodies

Moving on from the seedbed to the professional sphere, I speculate that George Fairfax might have been attracted by the uses of mutualism for the major performing arts companies. That audience numbers are falling and their average age rising calls into question whether the current structures of the companies are ideally suited to their requirements. For example does the subscriber system in its present form need to be re-thought?

An analysis undertaken for the Nugent inquiry established that fewer subscription packages are being sold, the number of performances included in each package has likewise decreased and the lead time for single performance ticket purchases has shortened. The effect has been to drastically reduce the operating capital available to the companies while increasing their marketing costs.[27] The report of the inquiry attributes the decline in part to people's lives having become so complicated that they are much less willing to enter into forward commitments such as being a subscriber requires.

None of this means that the subscription system has outlived its usefulness, but can it any longer carry on its own the burden of enabling the companies to retain the loyalty of their audiences and thereby ensure their financial viability? And is it a sufficiently sensitive mechanism for enabling the companies to access audience feedback, and accordingly be the better informed about what is wanted from them?

May not there be benefits from arrangements which encourage theatre attendees to feel that they are in some sense owners of the companies whose services they enjoy rather than exclusively their passive clients and consumers? May there not be a proportion of the audiences of the major companies who would like to play a more active part in their affairs than simply being a subscriber permits?

The increasing proportion of older people - in particular of retirees - among the audiences of the major companies as much represents an opportunity as it implies a threat for their well-being. Older people are precisely the group within our society who have time and energy available for the advancement of the performing arts which they value so highly. That attendees of a company's performances would not necessarily stand to gain a direct financial benefit from a formal mutualist recognition of their status as stakeholders in no way detracts from its legitimacy. Their stake or interest in the theatre is in its on-going ability to deliver a consistently rewarding aesthetic experience.

I have been deeply impressed by the role of multi-stakeholder bodies in enabling the Mondragon Co-operative Corporation to achieve its triumphant success. For example, Mondragon's Eroski retail co-operatives are structured as joint worker and consumer co-operatives. Their governing bodies are made up of equal numbers of customer and worker representatives, with a customer

[26] Hutton G. 1975, *"It Won't Last a Week!": The First Twenty Years of the Melbourne Theatre Company*, Melbourne, Macmillan. p. 19.

[27] Nugent 1999, pp. 144-145.

member as chairman. What customer members of Eroski value most highly about the business is its guarantee that it will not rip them off or supply other than pure and environment-friendly products, and the opportunity to be directly involved in its extensive quality control and consumer education and advocacy activities.

These unique arrangements have enabled Eroski to become Spain's largest and fastest-growing chain of supermarkets, hyper-markets and shopping malls.[28] Might there not be room, in addition to the current subscription system, for theatre companies to re-structure themselves as multi-stakeholder mutuals in the mould of Eroski, and thereby give attendees who so chose the option of sharing directly in their ownership?

Mutuality between Arts Bodies

Should an immediate move to multi-stakeholder mutuality within performing arts bodies be seen to be too radical or threatening, may there not be significant benefits to be gained from further mutualist arrangements between them? When, as an Arts Minister in the early 1980s, I instigated inquiries into the possibility of some sharing of back-stage and back-office functions between the major companies, the idea was widely denounced as an outrageous intrusion on their autonomy and independence. Few now would regard it as other than a common sense and commercially sound means of making the arts dollar go further.

How these arrangements might be taken further is again evident from the Mondragon experience. The governing body of the hugely successful Mondragon credit union - the Caja Laboral Popular - is made up jointly of representatives of its workers and of the client co-operatives which source their financial services and much of their capital from it. Thanks largely to the multi-stakeholder structure of the credit union, it has developed from a standing start in 1959 to what is now the fifteenth largest bank in Spain.[29] Might not a multi stakeholder mutual on the model of the Mondragon credit union have much to offer as a better means of delivering support services for the major companies?

No Prescriptive Models

I speculate finally that, receptive to mutualist solutions as George Fairfax might have become, he would regard none of the models I have discussed as prescriptive. While, as an intensely practical man, he would have rejected re-inventing the wheel, he would also have been aware of the difficulty of adopting in their entirety institutions and arrangements from countries whose social, economic and cultural experiences have differed from our own. What he would have wanted instead would have been to learn from the experiences of others, and adapt them as radically as our needs and circumstances may require.

In conclusion, I recall a final passage from Hugh Hunt's 1958 Kathleen Robinson Lectures. Hunt said:

> ... unless we accept love as an ingredient of theatre-going, unless we care for it sufficiently to want to participate in it, then the whole magic of those who make it will fail. This love of theatre must be even stronger in those who make it - strong enough to overcome the disappointments, the frustrations and failures that will be encountered in the process. For theatre-making is a vocation, and it cannot be made, nor can any art be made, if it is regarded solely as a business - if its success is measured by box-office returns alone.[30]

Consumate a man of the theatre as was George Fairfax, he would have been familiar with Hunt's words. What he said and did throughout his career was guided and inspired by the same

---

[28] See Mathews R. 1999, *Jobs of Our Own: Building a Stakeholder Society*, Sydney, Pluto Press (Australia) and London, Comerford & Miller.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Hunt 1960, p. 5.

aspiration for a truly great Australian theatre to which Hunt's lectures so eloquently gave expression. His dream would have been that those of us who now follow in his footsteps will set ourselves no less exacting a standard.

Race Mathews is a Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Business and Economics at Monash University and an Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Business and Law at Deakin University. He was previously chief of staff to Gough Whitlam as Leader of the Opposition 1967-72, a federal MP, a state MP and minister and a municipal councillor. His ministerial portfolios included Minister for the Arts and Minister for Police and Emergency Services1982-87, and Minister for Community Services 1987-88. His *Australia's First Fabians: Middle-Class Radicals, Labour Activists and the Early Labour Movement* was published by Cambridge University Press in 1994, and his *Jobs of Our Own: Building a Stakeholder Society* in 1999 by Pluto Press (Australia) and Comerford and Miller (UK). His E-mail address is race@netspace.net.au.